

5. God hallowed the Seventh Day

Last week I said that the two themes of blessing and holiness are related. God blessed and hallowed the seventh day. The blessing and the holiness of the seventh day are God's interaction or involvement (union) with His creation to fulfill His purpose for creation. We have seen that blessing is tied to the presence of God and they are now given to us in Christ.

Holiness - Our Connectedness with Christ

Just like the blessing of God, holiness is also tied to the presence of God and not the result of our actions. Our holy actions are the result of God's presence in our lives. We are holy because God is in us and God is holy. We cannot attain to holiness by what we do.

'Holiness' is a much-misunderstood topic. We have come to understand 'holiness' in the context of our morality and that changes with each generation. We understand 'holiness' in terms of what we do and how we live. Yes, that is true and I am not saying that 'holiness' has nothing to do with morality. What I am saying is that we cannot understand holiness merely in those contexts. So, what is holiness?

Holiness is what is done to us and not by us.¹

This must be the theme throughout our lives and indeed the core of our theology. Whether it be blessing or holiness, the underlying understanding has to be our connectedness with Christ and the Triune God. What we have been doing over the years is that we have departed from God and made all our efforts with whatever resources we have, to work out an understanding to justify that. That distorts theology and our understanding of God. We start with morality and work towards God. No, we start with God and work towards morality.

With the liberalizing of theology, pietism flourished. It is man's effort outside of God to understand holiness. I am here not knocking pietism as I have grown up with the pietistic movement and I would be worse off without them. I am not here saying that all that is wrong or right. What is wrong is not what is taught, but that the starting point is with man and not God.

We need to start thinking about holiness from the point of creation. God hallowed the 'seventh day'. In other words, God has made the 'seventh day' holy and we live in the holiness of the 'seventh day'. How then are we to live? We live in the holiness of God. There was no commandment given at creation as to what Adam and Eve had to do to be holy. Adam and Eve lived in the most intimate relationship with God, their creator, i.e. until the fall. Just as the blessings were given at creation to empower humanity to live in relatedness with God, these are the very blessings of God given to us to live in holiness with Him, i.e. to live connected or in union with Him. So, holiness is not something engendered or devised by humanity to please God. It is living in the blessing of God, the very blessings that enable us to live in holiness.

I think the story of Moses before the burning bush is pivotal to our understanding of holiness.

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex. 3:1-6)

Moses was told to take off his sandals as the ground on which he was standing was holy ground. The question is why is that ground holy? Was there something intrinsic about that piece of ground that was

¹ This is the theme of the book, *Housing Heaven's Fire*, by John C. Haughey, S.J. (Loyola Press, 2020).

holy? In other words, was the ground designated holy by God like the way we designate an area for this or that function? Answer is no. The area of ground was holy because of the presence of God. Before that it was just simply a piece of ground. Was the bush a holy bush because it was a special species of vegetation? Again, the answer is no. The bush was holy because of God's presence. And so, after the event and Moses had moved off and God was no longer there, it was no longer holy. God spoke to Moses from that bush. It was Moses' calling. It was Moses' commissioning to fulfill the purpose of God.

Throughout the Mosaic laws, the call to be holy is made many times to Israel. Together with this call we see the statement, 'I am the Lord who sanctifies you'. Holiness is the work of God in us.

⁷ Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. ⁸ Keep my statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you. (Lev. 20:7-8)

We are to be holy as God is holy. However, as we have seen last week with the blessing of God, God had given us "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). He has blessed us and empowers us from within us. The purifying work starts there. Note that the verse says, 'I am the Lord, I sanctify you'. It is God who makes us holy. We do not become holy no matter what we do.

There is something to be said about the teaching of pietism. To be pious is to be holy. As I have said, I grew up with their teaching and I am thankful for all the restrictions they put on me as a young person. How can a little fellow or a young person with little knowledge make those kinds of decision regarding behavior and life matters? They need guidance. However, there comes a time when we come of age and have received the adoption into God's family as the children of God. The Spirit comes into our hearts and we experience the freedom that is in Christ as Paul says. When we read in Leviticus the words, 'I am the Lord, and I sanctify you', our union with Christ makes that a reality in our lives. That is our holiness.

In our ministry at Murray Bridge, some of the new believers continue in their old ways and habits which we think should stop. With some of the more obvious and unacceptable practices we will tell them, but with others we leave them to work things out as the Spirit of God leads them. And we see that happened time and again. If we had gone to spell everything out for them right at the beginning, then we will be putting over them an external set of controls from us. The real change in a person does not come from an external set of rules, but by the work of the Spirit within the heart of the person.

Holiness comes by union with Christ and He sanctifies us from within us. We do not achieve holiness by our efforts. As God sanctifies us, He empowers us from within to live and behave in the way He desires. Many have discovered that power within them as they grow in Christ. Long held habits were no longer practiced. Their lives were changed and they now take on the added responsibilities of leadership. That is the work of God in their lives and they now know the blessings of God and are living in the holiness of God in the 'seventh day'.

The creational covenant

We need to come back to the beginning of Genesis to see that holiness is part of the creational covenant.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (Gen. 2:1-3)

God made the seventh day holy. We don't. What does that mean? Holiness is all that God is. Wherever God is, that is holy. It is not a property that is conferred. It is connectedness. In calling Israel to observe the Sabbath, the commandment includes the statement that God made the day holy, re-affirming the creational covenant.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ... ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8, 11)

In other words, in affirming the Sabbath rest, God wanted humanity to be connected with Him just as it was at creation. We are asked to ‘keep it holy’, not make it holy. God made it holy and we are asked to keep in His presence. Both the blessing and hallowing of the seventh day are tied to the presence of God. Despite the fall, God continued to reaffirm this covenantal rest throughout the history of Israel until its fulfilment with the resurrection of Christ. God made this day holy and its final fulfilment came with the marriage of the bride and the lamb, God and humanity in oneness dwell. Thus, in observing the Sabbath, we not only look back to creation and forward to the eschatological fulfilment, but we also experience the fulness of God’s blessing even now.

Thus, we see that the Sabbath rest is not merely going to church on a Sunday. It is much more than that. It involves the whole of life. In observing the Sabbath rest, we project ourselves onto the final chapter in salvation history when we dwell with God in an unbreakable oneness, the fulfilment of the creational covenant.

Holiness and love

Morality has to be subordinated to the personhood of God because He alone is holy. I want to say again that we do not work from morality to God, but from God to morality. God’s holiness is tied in with His creation. He blessed and hallowed His creation. In other words, the expression of God’s holiness is in relationship to His creation, whether it be fallen or unfallen. The expression of holiness is relational and not merely in abstract ethical principles. Another word to express holiness is righteousness. Again, righteousness is not mere ethics but relational. God’s righteousness is expressed in His love for His creation. His blessing and the giving of His Son and Spirit are the expression of His holiness. His righteousness is doing what He said He will do because of what He is. What did God do with His unfaithful creation? He seeks her to bring her back to Himself. That is love and that is His holiness. Holiness is relational and is expressed in love, not merely in ethical principles. It is not altered by circumstances. That is our freedom when we can be what we are created to be and this is the work and the empowering by the Holy Spirit of God. It is all because God blessed and made the seventh day holy, the seventh day in which we live.

The Fourth Commandment

We have been quite exhaustive in the treatment of the fourth commandment. I trust we can now appreciate why this is the most important commandments. Without this commandment we will be on our own trying to keep the other nine. God has completed His work on creation and we are to live in His rest, i.e. in all that God has blessed us with so that we remain in union with Him. It is only in this way that we are enabled to live as He has commanded us. Our observance of the seventh day (or first day) is an expression of our union with Him and it is this union that is our holiness, not because we observe this day.